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Increasing access to healthy, fresh and local food to students in three rural public schools in northeast Iowa

Abstract

How can we increase capacity of food service directors to improve school lunches with local fruits and vegetables? Through regular meeting and sharing of insights among food service directors, small mini-grants, and offering technical assistance in developing supply chains that meet schools' needs.

Keywords

Farm to institution, Fruit and vegetables

Disciplines

Horticulture | International and Community Nutrition



Increasing access to healthy, fresh and local food to students in three rural public schools in northeast Iowa

Abstract: Mini-grants were offered to three school districts and the food service directors gathered regularly to share their insights and experiences. All school districts involved made significant progress in moving toward their goal of offering healthy, locally grown meals.

Principal Investigator:

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Budget:

\$19,254 for year one
\$20,026 for year two

QHow can we increase capacity of food service directors to improve school lunches with local fruits and vegetables?

AThrough regular meeting and sharing of insights among food service directors, small mini-grants, and offering technical assistance in developing supply chains that meet schools' needs.



MARKETING

Background

The key objectives of this project were to build capacity of food service directors in at least three rural school districts in Black Hawk County, facilitate communications among food service directors in northeast Iowa, and increase access to healthy local fruits and vegetables. The team from Northern Iowa Food and Farm Partnership (NIFFP) worked closely with three partner schools (Dike-New Hartford, Sumner, and Waverly-Shell Rock) to develop their individualized farm to school programs. The group also worked with the University of Northern Iowa's Price Lab School and Independence Community Schools.

Approach and methods

The project strategies included convening a small learning community of food service directors who met periodically and shared their experiences, professional development of food service directors through attendance at national and state conferences, and availability of mini-grants (through another grant leveraged from other sources) to initiate changes each school deemed necessary to move forward to feature more locally produced fruits and vegetables in school menus.

A grant from the Wellmark Foundation allowed the investigator to work with the Price Lab School at the University of Northern Iowa, which resembles a small rural school, and Independence Community Schools to involve them in this process.

Results and discussion

All three districts took steps to increase the amount of fresh, local produce in their school meals. The districts also integrated farm to school ideas into curricula through projects such as school gardens and farm field trips, benefiting from the experiences of the other schools in the working group. Working group meetings allowed food service directors to share ideas and suggestions, and get advice.

Two districts, Sumner and Dike-New Hartford, successfully obtained local produce, including apples, tomatoes, cucumbers, potatoes, pears, green beans, carrots and squash, for use in school lunches. Waverly-Shell Rock, the largest of the three districts, is negotiating with growers for produce grown in the next spring and fall. Project organizers helped the Sumner school district plan their school garden. They

have a grant of free seeds from the America the Beautiful Foundation, tilled ground with the help of community volunteers and plan to have their first planting next spring (2014).

Two working group meetings were held for food service directors from Leopold Center and Wellmark grant schools to meet, network and share their experiences with the farm to school program. Mary Kay Madsen, a consultant for the Iowa Department of Education, Bureau of Nutrition, Health and Transportation Services, presented on procurement laws and answered questions. The second meeting focused on in-classroom aspects of farm to school programming.

Mini-grants were an effective incentive for schools to develop sustainable farm to school programs. The schools decided how their grants are spent, which fostered a sense of ownership of their programs, contributing to future program sustainability.

Waverly-Shell Rock food service received a mini-grant to help their farm to school program. Their first-year funds were used to buy serving bowls to make the presentation of fresh produce more attractive to students and a new blender to process fruits and vegetables more efficiently, and to help fund additional staff time needed for farm to school activities. Dike-New Hartford planned to spend their mini-grant on new knives for the kitchen (essential for processing fresh produce) and additional storage containers. Sumner is considering putting their funds towards garden expenses.

Independence schools used their first mini-grant to help fund a part-time, dedicated farm to school coordinator to assist the food service director with establishing their program. The coordinator started this fall, and has sent out bid packets, personally contacted growers, visited classrooms to sample local produce, and talked with students about why it is important to eat a healthy diet.

Independence invited Mark Armstrong from Acoustic Farms in Springville, Iowa to return after a successful earlier visit. He demonstrated to first grade classrooms how to make mozzarella cheese and provided samples. This visit was covered by several local media outlets, including the Waterloo-Cedar Falls Courier and Radio Iowa.

Price Lab School took first and second graders on a field trip to three local farms from which the school has purchased food. Students visited a cattle farm, an apple orchard, and a diversified produce farm, learning about the wide array of locally available food. Price Lab School has renewed its dedication to hiring high school students as lunch line servers, which has helped foster dialogue among students about what they're eating. Additionally, the school has partnered with UNI communications students to create informational pieces about the steps they are taking to create healthier school meals to raise awareness in the broader community.

Price Lab School and Independence continue to have productive, student-run gardens, which serve multiple functions in farm to school programs. This fall, both kitchens incorporated their garden fresh vegetables such as tomatoes, cherry tomatoes, peppers, and summer squash into some menus. Additionally, the gardens are virtual outdoor classrooms, giving students hands-on experience with growing their own food, botany, and entomology.

Based on the successes of the Wellmark schools' gardens, CEEE staff member Andrea Rissing helped the Sumner school district (one of the three schools North Iowa Food and Farm Partnership is working with through a grant from the Leopold Center) plan their own school garden. They have a grant of free seeds from the America the Beautiful Foundation, tilled ground with the help of community volunteers, and plan the first planting for next spring (2014).

Conclusions

Challenges for increasing the volume of farm to school activity include procurement laws and practices. These laws often are confusing, especially for those new to farm to school programming. Other challenges included frequent turnover of school food service directors, which made it difficult to maintain momentum. Six schools hired new food service administrators during the grant period. Also, school administrators have not made school foods a priority, and as a result the needed resources aren't provided to offer healthy meals.

Impact of results

1. Independence School District has reestablished its Vocational Agriculture program after a 50-year absence. A one-acre garden will provide some of the fresh produce for school meals and the school lunch program continues to buy some fruits and vegetables from local farms.
2. Black Hawk County is benefitting from the presence of a FoodCorps members working in Waterloo and Independence schools to provide school garden and nutrition education.
3. The UNI College of Education has committed to funding a part-time staff member to facilitate more farm to school activities in the region.

Education and outreach

Media coverage about farm to school activities in the area has appeared in the newspapers including the *Waterloo-Cedar Falls Courier*, *Farmers Market Today*, *Sumner Gazette* and the *Des Moines Register*, and on Radio Iowa.

Some of the project's outreach activities included:

- Tours of six local farms for food service directors, staff, and buyers interested in learning more about sourcing ingredients locally and meeting farmers, July 2010
- A "Summer Supper on the Farm" event at a local produce farm, including a locally sourced meal and a farm tour to foster community around local foods production, July 2010
- Presentation at a local Iowa Farm Bureau chapter on NIFFP's work and farm to school efforts, August 2010
- Two working group meetings, bringing together school food service directors from the region to discuss farm to school programming, September and November 2010
- Presentation to a group of Cedar Falls Utilities employees on NIFFP's work and farm to school efforts, October 2010

**For more information,
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Leveraged funds

The Ike Leighty Foundation contributed \$2,000 for local farm to school work and the Black Hawk County Board of Supervisors contributed \$5,000 for programming, with the possibility of further funding.